Al-Risala 1999

November-December

A Final Word

A city clock-tower informs people of the correct time. People set their watches according to it. Nobody bothers about who the engineers and mechanics who constructed the clock-tower were, or where the parts that they used were produced. The fact that it keeps good time is enough to attract everybody. God's religion is much the same sort of clock-tower, constructed for man's guidance; yet people fail to look at it and find their way by it.

There can only be one reason for this; people are serious in wanting to know the time, but not the word of God. God's religion is connected with the next life, while a clock-tower is a thing of this world. The clock has an important part to play in the realization of their worldly ambitions. They recognize its importance. But they have no ambitions for the future life, and no regard for the importance of something which guides man to eternal success.

True submission to God does not mean just acknowledging His existence. It involves total attachment to Him. It is an inward state with an outward form. Discovery of God is an event of incomparable impact which can never remain hidden. If God's truth has been revealed to someone, it will always be apparent. One so favoured will desire those around him to bear witness to the fact that he has answered the call of God, set aside the idols of worldly gain and expediency, and devoted himself entirely to God. If one claims inner faith, but does not express it, one can only be looking at faith as a convenience. Anyone who puts worldly interests before God cannot ever discover Him. Preoccupation with worldly priorities and prejudices are the very opposite of true submission to God, and two such conflicting states can never merge in one soul.

A Shaft of Light

The owner of a transport business once found himself in weak and vulnerable position because, for technical reasons, he had once had one of his vehicles registered in the name of another person several years before, and that person still held its licence. The licence-holder decided one fine day that he would take possession of the vehicle himself, and that its real owner would have to make do with a paltry sum of money in exchange. The owner naturally felt that the most dreadful injustice was being done to him and, greatly incensed, he was determined to have his revenge. Night and day he lived in a frenzy, thinking of ways and means to eliminate his enemy. Truly he wished to crush him like an insect. For six long months he lived in this state of morbid preoccupation, losing all interest in his home and his business, and becoming, finally, like the ghost of his former self. Then, one day, he had an experience which changed the course of his life. As he was pacing up and down one of the streets of the town where he lived, lost in black, vengeful fantasies, he heard the unmistakable sounds of someone making a speech before a large gathering. Curious, and for once drawn out of himself, he approached the gathering of people and began to listen to the speaker. He was suddenly struck by what he was saying: "Think well before taking revenge, for you too shall suffer the vengeance of others." It was as if a shaft of bright light had suddenly penetrated his mind and with each example that the speaker gave to drive home his point, he felt himself turn into a new person. He decided there and then to give up his negative way of thinking, in fact, to forget the whole sorry episode, and to devote his time and energy to his family and his business. The full realization had come to him that it was on himself that he had inflicted suffering and not on his enemy, and that it was best to leave such matters to, God. In beginning to think in this way, he found that; bit by bit, he was once again able to make a constructive approach to things and it was not long before he became more successful than he had ever been. In pursuing positive ends he had also attained peace of mind, and that, for him, had been the most important thing of all.

4-5 November-December 1999

Narrow-Mindedness

According to La Rochefoucauld: “Mediocre spirits generally condemn everything that exceeds their small stature.” Perceiving this common human failing, a modern poet implores people: “Don’t criticize what you can’t understand.”

The trouble is, people tend to judge matters on how they affect their own selves. They are quick to support anything which improves their own position, or at least does not downgrade them in any way. But when something appears threatening to their own position, they oppose it, regardless of its intrinsic worth.

Take, for example, the case of our Arabic madrasahs (schools) functioning in the Indian sub-continent. Generally, they include a course in ancient Aristotelian logic in their syllabus. We say “logic,” or that is the name by which this science is known, but it would be more accurate to call it “illogic”. What is taught in the name of logic has nothing to do with true logic. It is not conducive to the logical presentation of Islam vis a vis modern education.

The administrative authorities of one such Arabic school decided unanimously to withdraw all text-books on classical logic from their syllabus. A new course in philosophy was to be prepared, conforming to modern academic standards. Unfortunately, however, they were unable to implement this decision. Why? Because the professor of logic in their institution opposed it tooth and nail. As he was a senior teacher in the school, the administrators were unable to go against his wishes.

One does not have to look far to see the reason for this opposition. This professor only had a knowledge of classical logic; he had no knowledge of modern philosophy. He feared that if classical logic were taken out of the syllabus, he himself would lose his status in the institution. He would be left like a teacher who knew only French, trying to get his point across in a school where the medium of instruction was Arabic. In this case, it was very small-minded of him to allow his own feelings of professional insecurity to stand in the way of modernization.

The Human Personality

If from a vessel containing water a single drop is found to be brackish, it means that all of the liquid is undrinkable. We need sample only of one drop to know with certainty what the rest will be like. Much the same is true of the human personality. It is like an over brimming vessel which keeps on shedding drops for other people to savour, to find sweet or brackish as the case may be. Small instances of an individual's behaviour and quite short interludes in his company are generally sufficient to tell us what his overall personality is like. A thoughtless remark, an unfair manoeuvre, a failure to give much-needed sympathy or support, a devious transaction – all these are the plain indicators, like those brackish drops of water from the larger vessel, which indicate the lack of integrity or callousness of the person you are dealing with.

The human personality has the same homogeneity as water. A single human weakness cannot therefore be considered in isolation, as if it were an exception. It has to be looked upon as being representative of the entire personality. If an individual proves unreliable in one matter, he is likely to evince the same unreliability in other matters; if he is guilty of untrustworthiness on one occasion, the chances are that this trait will show up time and time again.

There is only one kind of person who is an exception to that rule, and that is the one who subjects his own behaviour to constant re-appraisal, who is continually scrutinizing himself for weaknesses and faults and who, once having found such faults, wastes no time in rooting them out.

A man who has made a mistake can completely erase the marks of what is an unfortunate experience for others by admitting his mistake and begging forgiveness. Some people are pricked by their consciences, but do nothing to assuage the ruffled feelings of others, thinking that to do so would be sheer weakness and would mean a loss of face. Such people can never have healthy social relationships and can never win the respect of their fellow men. They do not realize that a man displays his true mettle when he sees his own wrong actions for what they are, and humbly asks forgiveness.

It is only he who has learned the art of moral introspection who will, in the long run, prove himself a person of inviolable integrity.

7-17 November-December 1999

The Call to God and Unity

The Muslims' unity is their greatest strength. The best means of achieving this unity is the call towards God. The' Qur'an says that God has chosen Muslims to promote the cause of true religion. Furthermore, the religion brought to them by the Prophet is to be conveyed by them to other communities. In this context the Qur'an commands them to hold fast to the rope of God and be united around the one God:

> So that His messenger may be
> A witness for you, and you
> Be witness for mankind.
> So, attend to your prayers,
> *Give zakat*
> And hold fast to Allah;
> He is your Protector–
> The Best to protect
> And the Best to help! (22:78)

The emphasis on unity, while entrusting Muslims with the task of inviting other peoples to the religion of God, indicates the close link between the call to God and unity. In fact, this call or invitation leads to harmony and unity, which in turn enables Muslims to effectively perform their task.

The traditions of the Prophet also testify to the interdependence of the call to God and unity. Miswar Bin Makhrama narrates that once the Prophet came to his companions and said to them, 'God has sent me as a blessing. Convey it to people on my behalf, and do not enter into dispute with each other as did the disciples of Jesus with him.'

The companions of the Prophet responded to this by saying: 'O Prophet of God, we shall not differ from you on any matter. Give us your commands and send us on our assigned missions.'

By virtue of their knowledge of true religion, the companions of the Prophet fully understood the responsibilities and implications of calling people to God. They were also aware of the character that they ought to possess for discharging such a responsibility.

History tells us that a mutual bond of brotherhood and unity existed among Muslims as long as they engaged themselves in the task of inviting people to the truth. But the moment they deviated from this path, they fell a prey to unending dispute and dissension. Subsequently, they were withdrawn from their designated duty of inviting people to God because of having lost their unity – the greatest strength of a community or group in this world.

An Example from An Early Islamic Age

According to most sources, the Prophet passed away on 12 Rabi al-Awwal of 11 A.H. Two weeks before his demise the Prophet assembled a special army to encounter the Romans (Byzantines). The Prophet included in this army all the leading companions with Osama bin Zayd bin Harith as their commander. The contingent was dispatched to Syria where a battle had taken place between Romans and Muslims at Mawta. Seventeen year old Osama was the son of a slave. Yet he was the most suitable person to lead this contingent. And all the more so, because earlier at the battle of Mawta (8 A.H.) the Romans had slain his father and he was now burning with the fire of vengeance. Osama set out on the mission assigned to him by the Prophet, making a halt at Juruf, a suburb of Madina and the location of the present Islamic University.

While Osama was camping with his army in Madina, he was informed of the Prophet's demise. He thereupon returned with his contingent to Madina to attend the last rites of the Prophet.

Abu Bakr Siddiq was appointed the first caliph with the unanimous approval of the Prophet's companions. Following this appointment, the Muslims had a consensus to hold back Osama's army at Madina itself. Due to the sad demise of the Prophet and the rising sedition of hypocrites, uncertain conditions prevailed all around. People were in favour of first consolidating the new Islamic state in Madina and only then launching any outside campaign.

In spite of general opposition, the first caliph did not approve of even a short delay in the dispatch of Osama's army, saying that on no consideration would he untie the knot tied by the Prophet of God, even though birds might snatch them up, beasts might devour them and dogs might drag the feet of the pious wives of the Prophet.

In order to underline the importance of this act, Abu Bakr accompanied Osama as far as Juruf. Osama went on horseback, while Abu Bakr walked beside him to give the necessary instructions. Despite Osama's repeated requests, Abu Bakr refused to ride, preferring to go on foot.

Both the Prophet of Islam and his first caliph resorted to such actions as matters of pressing need. The exigency in the present case was that of providing the Muslims with a field of action outside the land of Arabia to demonstrate their spirit of struggle in the cause of Islam. Whenever Muslim energies were not directed to this external target, they were soon enticed into internal factional conflicts, wrongly labeling such action as *jihad* in a bid to justify their misdeeds.

The External Target

When the Arabs entered the fold of Islam under the influence of the movement launched by the Prophet, they were full of Islamic zeal. They wanted the religion they had discovered as the greatest truth to be shared with other people. This zeal required an outlet for its expression. The timely dispatch of Osama's army was aimed at providing Muslims with a suitable sphere of action. Seeing the Romans' aggression as the occasion for a military encounter, the Prophet in his last days was able to divert the Muslims' zeal towards the communication of the divine message among non-Muslim communities. Hence, the energy wasted in internal disputes was utilized for fruitful activities in outer spheres. Had it not been so, the Muslims of Arabia would have indulged in fighting among themselves on the pretext of reforming each other, as is evident from the prevailing situations in almost all Muslim countries. The infighting among Muslims themselves would have halted the historical process of Islam before it had even begun. But for the prudent decision of the Prophet to direct Muslims' ardour towards external fields, Islamic history would have been an elegiac recital instead of a record of the exemplary deeds of the champions of Islam. Involvement in a lofty cause is a guarantee of noble character. But Muslims had lost this very nobility of character in their detachment from the cause of propagating God's message among the people.

Very soon after this military action had been taken against the Romans, in the times of the first pious caliph, the Persians (Sassanids) turned hostile to the Muslims forcing them to resort to confrontation. This afforded Muslims a large sphere of Islamic action spreading over Asia, Africa and Europe, as these two empires, the Roman and the Persian, dominated most of the populated world.

This stance taken by the Muslims against the Romans and Iranians was not aimed at any political gain or territorial expansion: its sole purpose was the propagation of the message of Islam. Muslims, imbued with a divine instinct, had left their homes to convince people to give up the worship of their fellow men and to become true worshippers of God. Past events are testimony to the fact that both Rome and Persia were the main targets for the propagation of the message of God, but the aggression demonstrated by the two empires forced Muslims to use military power against them. There were, however, nations like Ethiopia, Maldives, Indonesia and Malaysia who desisted from wielding arms against the Muslims, thus allowing Islam to flourish in these countries.

The process of the popularisation of Islam among the earlier non-Muslim nations began soon after the death of the Prophet, and continued successfully for about three decades.

This entire span of time witnessed the Muslims' concerted and united efforts to communicate the message of Islam among other nations.

Year of Unity

The process of popularizing Islam through the collective efforts of Muslims was hampered in the last days of the third pious caliph 'Uthman ibn 'Affan when Muslims, in an excess of zeal over the internal crusade, diverted their attention to the domestic sphere. There they entered into conflict with their own rulers in the name of political reform. The internal dispute heightened to such an extent that the people of a particular Muslim sect did not shrink even from assassinating their own caliph.

Even the killing of caliph ‘Uthman could not put an end to Muslims’ internal strife, for now they were divided into two groups over the requital for the murder of Caliph ‘Uthman. This deadly fight between the two factions continued for years. Deviation from the general cause of calling people to Islam harmed Muslims in two ways; on the one hand the process of dissemination and promotion of Islam came to a complete halt, while on the other the Muslims’ strength began to be pitted against their own people. Islam, once a binding force, now became the banner under which internal battles were fought.

Having experienced ten long years of strife and conflict, the Muslims were reunited in the year 41 A.H. And for that reason it is known in the history of Islam as the year of reunion. This blessing of unity came to the Muslims through Hasan ibn ‘Ali about whom the Prophet had predicted that he would be the harbinger of peace and reconciliation between the two great factions of Muslims.

Hasan was appointed the fifth caliph after the death of his father ‘Ali. Seeing that the caliphate had generated internal conflict, he unilaterally renounced his right to it to avoid exacerbating the differences existing among Muslims.

The two warring factions of Muslims were led by Hadhrat Hasan and Hadhrat Mu’awiyah. Hadhrat Hasan’s withdrawal from the office of the caliphate had, in a way, sealed up all possible internal strife and redirected Muslims’ endeavours towards the spread of Islam. The caravan of Islam once again after a delay of ten years set out on the path of progress. The reign of Mu’awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan (40-60 a.h.) witnessed the spread of Islam to an extent unparalleled in the centuries – long history of the religion. It was during his time that Islam extended as far as Samarqand, Afghanistan, Tunis and Rhodes Island, enroute to the Bosphorus Strait, the last being the gateway for the Muslims’ entry into Constantinople. In short, Islam made all-round progress in this period of overseas expansion.

A Lesson from History

The caliphate of Mu’awiyah has been made the subject of severe criticism. Some say that Mu’awiyah was the first ruler to introduce kingship into Islam. But, regardless of this criticism, it should be noted that the two-decade long rule of Mu’awiyah gives us an important lesson. Any effort to deter Muslims from internal strife and conflict, even if it is at the cost of introducing monarchy to a political institution, will always bring fruitful results in favour of Islam. Internal conflict leads Muslims to make destructive use of their Islamic spirit, yet, once distracted from the path of factional feuds; their zeal finds an active outlet in the efforts of spreading Islam.

Factional conflicts among Muslims are highly deplorable. An attempt, therefore, to save Muslims from internal strife encourages them to eschew unlawful acts and harnesses their Islamic spirit to the popularising and spreading of Islam. The energy or collective force that might otherwise be used in destructive activities is then devoted to the progress and consolidation of Islam. The target of Muslims’ reform and the inculcation in them of the exalted qualities of a noble Islamic character from which they had earlier been diverted by factional feuds, is automatically achieved.

Had the Muslims' crusading spirit been directed to the external sphere as in its earlier days, world history today would have been quite different.

The Call to God is the sacred mission of the Muslim community. This mission basically entails conveying the message of God to non-Muslim nations. This is the same mission which is also called *shahadah ala an nas.* After the line of Prophets came to an end with the Prophet Muhammad, Muslims were charged with the responsibilities of prophethood. Now Muslims have to perform the same task of conveying the message of God to non-Muslims for which the prophets were sent by God to the world.

'Da'wah', or the propagation of Islam among non Muslims, gives the proponent the opportunity to devote himself to outside activities. For the fulfillment of his task, he turns his zeal outwards. Externally targeted, the crusading spirit is then optimally exercised.

The accomplishment of the mission of calling people to God by Muslims brings divine grace to them, and develops in the community all those exalted qualities that are considered to be the key to unity.

The history of Islam presents ample proof of the above numerated facts. The period of thirty years after the death of the Prophet, when Muslims were engaged in the task of propagating Islam in the outer sphere, was marked by complete unity in the Muslim ranks. But with the beginning of internal conflicts in the last days of caliph 'Uthman, the process of the spread of Islam hung fire for ten years. However, the task of propagating Islam was resumed by Muslims when internal conflict came to an end as a result of the voluntary withdrawal of 'Hasan ibn Ali from the caliphate, and it continued on course for the next twenty years. Again, it was permanently disrupted due to conflict between Banu Umayya and Banu Hashim on the issue of political reform after Amir Mu'awiyah's death (60 A.H.)

Muslims are now paying the penalty for having given up the cause of spreading Islam, thanks to their unceasing internal conflict over the centuries. These conflicts are ostensibly taking place in the name of Islam, but in fact nothing is more un-Islamic in the world of God than this lamentable disunity.

The call to God is basically the title of the Islamic mission to convey the message of God to non-Muslims. (The technical nomenclature for the same task to be carried out among Muslims is reform or *islah).* In case one is extending the message of Islam to a non-Muslim, he will neither explain the implications of *(1)aamin bil sirr or (2)aamin bil jahr,* (i.e. pronouncing aamin in prayers loudly or silently), nor will he touch upon peripheral issues on which there is no consensus among Muslim sects. In a controversial situation, the only option for the Muslim will be to present to his addressee the principal tenets of Islam, like belief in one God, or *tawhid,* Prophethood, the life hereafter and human equality. In short, the general call to Islam entails the popularisation of the purely basic teachings of the religion.

It is an accepted fact that there is no contradiction in the fundamentals of religion. On the contrary, there are considerable differences among the people of various sects on juristic issues which are peripheral to religion. Therefore, whenever Islam draws the public attention, the basic aspects, which are unanimously agreed upon, are given due prominence, while the controversial aspects are kept in the background.

It is a natural principle that whenever a community devotes itself to the cause of calling people to God, it is blessed with unity and solidarity. People's attention, in such circumstances, is centred upon the basic and widely accepted precepts. To raise peripheral issues would mean creating differences among them. Whenever people devote their energies to promoting the basic teachings of Islam, there is inevitably a closer understanding among them. This approach eliminates conflict and paves the way for unity. To sum up, the introduction of peripheral and lesser issues leads to confrontation, whereas adherence to basic issues creates an environment favourable to integration.

Unity Despite Diversity

To call people to God in today's world is to represent God. Those who perform this service are destined to be the best rewarded in the life hereafter, for no other task in this world is of such magnitude. But, for the call to be effective there should be unity among the callers. Now, there have always been differences between human beings. Even when people are united, it does not mean that there are no differences at all. In fact, unity results from integration, not *without* differences but *despite* differences.

The companions of the Prophet evinced an exemplary unity that enabled them to bring about a great revolution throughout the world. However, their unity was not of the sort that recognised no differences. There were, indeed, considerable differences among them, both on religious and worldly matters. But, in spite of all such personal differences, they were united on the central cause of promoting Islam.

"Unity in diversity," the watchword of national integration, implies in practice the greatest sacrifice a human being can make. This sacrifice requires the vast generosity that induces the individual to tolerate a loss for the good of his fellow beings. It calls for the courage to recognise the excellence of others, despite personal differences. It demands that one be selfless enough to bow to men of higher qualities and capabilities, and that one be exalted enough in character to submit to the opinion of others. Voluntary self-sacrifice goes hand in hand with good-heartedness. It means offering the best seat to another, standing aside while others forge ahead, and remaining in obscurity so that others may stand in the limelight. Such individual sacrifice is the bedrock of collective unity.

Inviting people to embrace the message of God has great significance for man. All other things are inferior to it. The most frequent reason for the differences between the members of any given society is the lack of a great common purpose. The moment a great goal emerges before them, they will themselves withdraw from petty disputes and will thus achieve the greatness of an overarching unity.

17-18 November-December 1999

The Great Tidings

The chapter 78 of the Quran starts with these words: About what are they asking? About the fateful tidings – the theme of their disputes. But they shall know (the truth); before long they shall know it. (78: 1-5)

By News or the great news in this verse is meant the news of Doomsday. That is when the trumpet will be blown and Doomsday will burst upon them without prior warning. Today people are busy in this world. Everyone has his own views different from others. But with the onset of the greatest news of Doomsday all kinds of differences will cease altogether. Everyone will speak alike. A big news does engulf all the lesser news.

One small instance of this matter came before us in May 13, 1998 when Indian Government conducted five nuclear explosions in Rajasthan. These explosions were far more stronger than the atom bombs dropped in 1945 on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The moment explosions occurred they assumed the position of the greatest news for the country. The world media in which India hardly figured, was dominated with this Indian news of explosion.

For a few days it seemed as if the big news had engulfed all the small news.

This incident is a prior intimation of the advent of the Doomsday. Today everyone has his own tale to tell; none is ready to remain silent or to listen to another. But when the big news of Doomsday will be heralded, the entire state of affairs will see a transformation, having forgotten everything else they would think of one thing alone – that is, how to save themselves from the horror of Doomsday. A big news overshadows all the small news as if they had never existed at all. This fact is true not only as regards this world, it is all the more valid as regards the Hereafter.

18-19 November-December 1999

The Standard of Leadership

The Quran states:

> "Have no fear of them, fear Me." (5:3)

This verse of the Quran tells us expressly that the actual problem Muslims face in this world is not one of fear of human beings rather it is one of fear of God. Even if the fear appears to be coming from human beings still they must rush towards God. For the source of all matters is in the hands of God and it is He who is going to decree in favour of or in disfavour of anybody.

The statement of the Quran tells us the criterion of leadership. It is this criterion which determines as to which leadership is Islamic and which is unIslamic. The leader who tells people to fear God, who speaks in the language of low profile is the Islamic leader. It is this type of a leader whose activities harbinger good, both for the religion as well as its adherents.

Conversely the leader who warns people of dangers from human beings, who unearths human plots and incites his followers to fight against them is a *jahili* (un-Islamic) leader, for his leadership is devoid of Islamic spirits. Such leadership will not produce any good for the believers.

The believers' response to such *jahili* leaders ought to be in accordance with the Quranic injunction cited above.

Jahili leaders are here for the purposes of test that is why they can never be wiped out from the face of the earth. The successful are those who do not come under the influence of their enticing utterances and devote themselves in constructive activities on the basis of fear of God alone.

19-20 November-December 1999

Moon Mission

American Astronaut, Neil Armstrong, stepped on to the moon for the first time in July, 1969. The moment he set his foot on the moon, the control mission in America received these words uttered by him:

> "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind."

Armstrong and his two colleagues were selected from amongst the top 30 astronauts of the U.S.A. He possessed to a very high degree all those qualities which were necessary for this difficult, historic mission – extraordinary skill in flying, intelligence, strength, ability to absorb information, mental and emotional balance and the courage to accept challenges unhesitatingly. Once selected, he had to undergo rigorous training, for instance, having to remain in deep water for long periods so that he would become used to weightlessness. So that he could deal with every possible emergency, he did elaborate courses in astronomy, space flight, rocket flight, the physics of the moon, etc. – all with the help of computerized space data.

The 3100 ton Apollo 11 seemed a giant. It was as high as a 36-storey building, having 8 million parts and 91 engines installed in it. On the top was the comparatively small machine, the Columbia, in which the astronauts were seated to set off on their historic journey.

The space machine was duly blasted off, circling the earth for two and a half hours. Then its speed increased to 403 miles per minute and on reaching an altitude of 3000 miles the Columbia separated from the rest of the machines. It was so equipped that the seating space for the astronauts was only as much as in an ordinary taxi. Finally they alighted on the moon from where they gathered 46 pounds of moon-earth, leaving equipment worth 5 lakh pounds behind them. They also left their foot prints on its surface which hopefully will remain intact for half a million years.

It was only after such highly elaborate preparations that the" small step" could be taken which was going to result in such a "giant leap" for mankind".

20-21 November-December 1999

Our Potential is our Wealth

Psychologists have estimated that man puts to use only ten percent of the abilities with which he is born. Professor William James of Harvard University has very aptly observed, "What we ought to be, we are not ready to be." In spite of the inborn qualities nature has endowed us with, the successes which should have been ours in this world keep eluding us for the simple reason that we quite unthinkingly consent to lead inferior lives. Then, discontented, we put the blame on others for not giving us our due. But it is inside ourselves that we should look if we are to find the reasons for life's deficiencies. Constantly viewing others with envy and a sense of grievance will lead us nowhere, and can turn us into our own worst enemies. The fact should be faced fairly and squarely that it is only if we exploit our own potential to the full that we shall meet with success. Any other course will lead to failure.

It is essential, however, to determine at the outset whether our efforts are directed at worthwhile objectives. Without proper direction our potential will be wasted.

In ancient times and even up to mediaeval times, gold being greatly prized, one of the great preoccupations of the 'scientists' of those days was to convert base metals into gold. Dreams of instant wealth drove innumerable people over the centuries to superhuman efforts. But all this expenditure of time, money and energy was in vain, for death always overtook them before they could achieve anything. It never seemed to occur to any of them that these metals with which they worked had a different and greater potential than anyone could ever have imagined. Iron, for example, was convertible, not into gold, but into machinery, and could be used as a versatile building material of great strength. In the world of today, western nations, having learnt these secrets and directed their energies towards building up the relative technology, have succeeded in acquiring far greater wealth than mere silver and gold.

22-23 November-December 1999

Motion and Direction

A western thinker once commented, “You have removed most of the road blocks to success when you have learnt the difference between motion and direction.”

One intrinsic quality of activity is movement. When you are walking, driving, riding a bicycle, galloping along on horseback or roaring along on a motorcycle, you are moving. But in what direction? Are you moving towards your destination, or away from it? The actual motion in both cases seems to be no different in quality. The great difference between the two is that the former brings you ever nearer to Your destination, while the latter takes you further and further away from it – leaving you where? Nowhere. It is direction that is all-important. Even If we only get on to the slow-moving bullock cart or a cycle rickshaw, we shall do better than a jet plane which has no sense of direction.

Both in our private lives and social existence, it is imperative that we take stock of our means and resources and then set off in the right direction, if, sooner or later, we are to reach our destination.

Often people launch themselves on careers, plunging headlong into them, without giving due thought to their actual capacities and to whether they have any real potential which can be developed. At times they are led astray by trivial considerations, ill-founded opinions and overwhelming emotions, and rush heedlessly into whatever first comes their way. When the result is not what they had anticipated, they fall to complaining against others, lamenting their losses and failures and claiming that it was due to the prejudices of others that they had had suffer frustrations and that their careers had come to naught. Had they given more profound thought to the matter, they would have realised that the fault lay in their own ill-judged planning or even total aimlessness. Had they started out in the right direction, others would not then have had the opportunity to place obstacles in their path and turn their successes into failures.

23-24 November-December 1999

The Life Force

A creeper growing in a courtyard once had the misfortune to have its roots and branches buried under mounds of earth and rubble when the house was undergoing repairs. Later, when the courtyard was cleaned up, the owner of the house cut away the creeper, which had been badly damaged, and even pulled out its roots so that it would not grow again. The whole courtyard was then laid with bricks and cemented over.

A few weeks later, something stirred at the place where the creeper had been rooted out. The bricks heaved upwards at one point as though something were pushing them from below. This appeared very strange, but was dismissed as being the burrowings of rats or mice. The riddle was solved when some of the bricks were removed, and it was discovered that the creeper had started growing again, although in a sadly distorted form. As it happened, not all of its roots had been pulled out, and when the time of the year came around for them to grow, life began to stir within them and they pushed their way up through the cement to the sunlight. It is one of nature's miracles that these tender leaves and buds, which can be so easily crushed to a pulp between finger and thumb, can summon up such strength as to force their way through bricks and cement.

The owner of the house then regretted having attempted to take the creeper's life. He remarked, "It is just as if it were appealing to me for the right to grow. Now I certainly won't stand in its way." And so saying, he removed some more of the bricks so that it would grow unhindered. In less than a year's time, a fifteen-foot creeper was flourishing against the courtyard wall at the exact point from which it had been so unceremoniously 'uprooted.'

A mountain, despite its great height and girth, cannot remove so much as a pebble from its flanks. But these tiny, tender buds of the tree can crack a cemented floor and sprout up through it. Whence such power? The source of its energy is the mysterious phenomenon of our world called life. Life is an astonishing, ongoing process of this universe – a force which will claim its rights in this world, and, even when uprooted, it continues to exist, albeit dormant, at one place or the other and reappears the moment it finds the opportunity. Just when people have come to the conclusion that, because there is nothing visible on the surface, life must be at an end, that is just when it rears its head from the debris.

God fills with peace and faith the heart of one who swallows his anger, even though he is in a position to give vent to it.

-Hadith

25 November-December 1999

Hasten Slowly

A young man once came to a venerable master and asked, ‘How long will it take to reach enlightenment?’ The master said, ‘Ten years.’ The young man blurted out, ‘So long!’ The master said, ‘No, I was mistaken. It will take you twenty years.’ The young man asked, ‘Why do you keep adding to it!’ The master answered, ‘Come to think of it, in your case it will probably be 30 years.’ (Philip Kapleau, *Readers Digest, 1983)*

A goal can be achieved in the course of ten years, but you want to attain it in just ten days. This means that you want to reach your destination in leaps and bounds. But there is an old saying: “The more hurry, the less speed.”

A traveler who wants to dash straight as an arrow, without allowing time for twists and turns, will collide with many obstacles in his headlong flight. Far from reaching his destination faster, he will surely come to grief and fall by the wayside. He shall then have to retrace his steps to the starting point, heal his wounds and only then set forth again. All of this will take time, precious time – time which should have been spent on the onward journey. Had he proceeded in a normal, unhurried way, he would have reached his destination all in good time.

Just as it is wrong to delay, it is equally wrong to be in too much of a hurry. All work can be completed in due course. To delay work is idle and irresponsible, but to do it with unseemly and unwarrantable haste is a sign of crass impatience. In the world of God, where each event has its allotted time, both extremes are doomed to failure.

26-27 November-December 1999

Having the Courage to Err

Two friends, Ahmed and Iqbal, both lived in the same city. Ahmed was a graduate, while Iqbal's education had not gone beyond the eighth standard. It happened once that Iqbal had to go to an office on business and was accompanied by his friend, Ahmed. When the business had been transacted, and they were both coming out of the office, Ahmed said to Iqbal, "You were speaking such horrible English! With such bad English, I would never have dared to open my mouth!" Iqbal was not the slightest bit disconcerted at being so roundly criticized. Exuding confidence, he said, "Speak wrong so that you can speak right!" Then he added, "Although you are a graduate and I have not got any degrees, you will soon find that I will start speaking in English and you will never be able to do so."

That was twenty years ago. Now Iqbal's words have come true. Ahmed is still at the stage he was at twenty years ago, but Iqbal, astonishingly, has made great progress. He now speaks English quite fluently and no one can fault him on grammar and pronunciation.

This daring attitude on the part of Iqbal certainly proved to be of great advantage to him for, at the outset of his career, he just owned a small shop in the city, whereas today, he runs a big factory.

The motto: "Speak wrong so that you can speak correct," has obviously in his case been the key to success. This principle on which Iqbal operated has a bearing not only on language but on all practical concerns in life. In the present world, the potentially successful are those who are possessed of courage, who advance fearlessly and take the initiative in the face of risks. Only those who have the courage to err will accomplish anything worthwhile in life. Those who are afraid of making mistakes will be left behind in the race of life, and their ultimate goals will recede further and further into the distance.

27-28 November-December 1999

The Order of Nature

Try closing your room, going away, and returning after a few weeks. What do you find on your return? A thick layer of dust all over the room. This is so unpleasant that you don't feel like sitting in the room until it has been dusted. Equally unpleasant is the dust blown in your face by a high wind, you find yourself longing for the wind to drop, so that there should be no more irritating dust.

But what is this dust that we find so annoying? It is in fact a loose surface layer of fertile soil, the very substance which enables the growth of all forms of vegetables, fruits and cereals. If this soil did not lie on the face of the earth, it would be impossible for us to live on the earth at all.

It is this same dust that makes the earth's atmosphere dense enough for water to vaporize, forming clouds which produce torrents of water to revive and replenish the earth. Without rain, there would be no life on earth, and rain is only possible because of the dust in the earth's atmosphere.

The redness of the sky which we see at sunrise and sunset is also due to the presence of dust in the atmosphere. In this way dust, besides possessing multiple practical benefits, also contributes to the beauty of the world.

From this straight forward example we can see how God has placed unpleasant things alongside the pleasant things of life. Just as the rose bush, along with its exquisite flowers, also possesses piercing thorns, so also does life contain an amalgam of both pleasing and displeasing objects. This is the way God has created the world. There is nothing for us to do but to fit in with this order of nature that He has laid down. Much as we may try, it is impossible for us to have things any other way.

To complain about things, then, is a fruitless exercise. If one wants to complain, one is sure to find plenty to complain about in life. The intelligent thing to do is to forget the unpleasant things which are a part and parcel of life, bury grudges, and carry on seeking to fulfill one's true purpose in life.

Human Potential

In the Ohio University of the U.S.A. there is a department known as the Disaster Research Centre. It was established in 1963, and has so far studied over one hundred different calamities affecting human beings on a vast scale. It was discovered that at moments of crisis, an extraordinary new potential develops in people which saves them from succumbing to disasters and their aftermath. In 1961, for example, Texas was struck by a severe coastal tempest, but less than half of the inhabitants opted to vacate the area. Over 50 percent of them had the confidence to stay on in spite of the storm warnings issued to them four days in advance. Subsequently, in 1971, a big dam was weakened considerably following an earthquake, which seriously endangered the lives of 70,000 people, but at that very critical time only 7 percent of the population chose to leave their hearths and homes.

Such research has also revealed that the victims of such disasters still maintain high hopes for the future. The citizens of the two affected areas of Texas, having witnessed the destruction caused by horrible floods, were interviewed about what they felt were their future prospects. Surprisingly, less than ten percent expressed apprehension and misgivings. The rest of them, irrespective of the large-scale destruction, were hopeful about their future. The above-mentioned institute concluded the report of the research it had conducted on disasters by saying, “The reality of events suggests that human beings are amazingly controlled and resilient in the face of adversity. Perhaps heroism, not panic or shock, is the right word to describe their most common behaviour in times of disaster.” The Creator has endowed His creature, man, with extraordinary capabilities, one of which is his capacity to plan his life anew with tremendous vigour, even when threatened with total annihilation. Man can do more than compensate for his losses. The discovery of this natural, hidden potential in man serves to teach a great lesson, that is, that no individual, whether singly or as part of a group, who suffers trials and tribulations, should ever waste a moment’s time in lamenting and grieving over his losses. Instead, he should press God-given capabilities into service to reconstruct his life. It is quite possible that the very circumstances in which he seemed to be heading towards complete annihilation, could serve to unfold a new and brighter phase of his existence.

30-31 November-December 1999

An Admonition

> Do you not see how Allah sends down water from the sky which penetrates the earth and gathers in springs beneath? With it He brings forth plants of various colours. They wither, they turn yellow, and then He turns them to chaff. Surely in this there is an admonition for men of understanding.
>
> He whose heart Allah has opened to Islam, shall receive light from his Lord. But woe to those whose hearts are hardened against the remembrance of Allah! Truly, they are in the grossest error (39:21-22).

The breathtakingly astonishing system of rains on earth, then the growth of vegetation from it, then the bringing forth of crops – all these material happenings have innumerable lessons to teach. But only those who are capable of going deeper into the subject will learn anything from them.

God has planned the external world in such a fashion that everything in it serves as a sign of the Higher Reality. Man has, moreover, been endowed with such capabilities as help him to read those signs and understand them. Now those who keep their natural faculties alive and, by availing of them, ponder over the things of the world, will unlock the doors of realisation within themselves. While those who allow the intellect to become sluggish will be unable to learn lessons from anything. They will see, but this will not be the seeing of realisation; they will hear, but this will not be the hearing of realisation.

In this present world everything that begins is heading towards its pre-destined end. For instance, a seed, once sprouted, starts its life as a tiny plant then gradually develops into a sapling, then into a fully grown tree. The same is true of the things of this world.

This happening serves as a divine lesson for man. In this way God tells man that he is also heading from beginning to end: childhood followed by youth and old age. Afterwards death will lead us to a new and eternal existence.

31 November-December 1999

Human Will

> And We enjoined man (to show kindness) to his parents, for with much pain his mother bears him, and he is not weaned before he is two years of age. We said: 'Give thanks to Me and to your parents. To Me shall all things return. But if they press you to serve besides Me deities you know nothing of, do not obey them. Be kind to them in this world, and follow the path of those who turn to Me. To Me you shall all return, and I will declare to you all that you have done' (31:14-15).

After God, a man's parents are the ones to whom he is most indebted. But where there is a clash between what his parents desire from him and God's will, he must disregard the former in favour of the latter. However, even then it is incumbent on him to continue to serve his parents.

Man's responsibility to his parents is to pay their dues, to respect them, always to speak gently to them, to fulfill their needs and to be of service to them in the fullest sense of the word.

Man's obligation to God is to thank Him from the deepest recesses of his heart. He must acknowledge the godhead of God. All his feelings and emotions must be in acknowledgement of God's blessings until at every moment he comes to remember God, his very existence becomes an expression of God Almighty and he is overwhelmed with thoughts of God.